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AUTHOR Seidel, Robert N.
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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses one mentor's approach to teaching history in an individualized instruction/self-study environment. The first part of the paper discusses student-mentor relations, emphasizing that the role of the mentor is to act as a mediator in a special way between the student and the abstract world of scholarship. For example, mentors need to consider that much of the journal literature that represents contributions to historical understanding is often written to meet professional criteria for publishing rather than for the general undergraduate reader. The second and major part of the paper contends that the mentor as mediator can serve the needs of students by emphasizing procedural elements for studying history. These include the following skills and concepts relevant to historical inquiry: reading, definition or clarification of terms, dealing with the significance of historical works, argument, description and chronology, generalization, analysis and criticism, research and writing, and moral sensitivity. In conclusion, the mediator should serve as a wise and trusted couselor and teacher and foster a supportive learning environment. A major objective of such a history course is to help students develop into capable, sensitive people. Although the paper discusses the discipline of history, this approach is applicable to other areas in the humanities, the natural and social sciences, and as a personal reference for intellectual commitments and learning experiences. (KC)

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DOING HUMANITIES

IN AN

INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION/SELF-STUDY

COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

SP010226

Robert N. Seidel, Mentor
Genesee Valley Regional Learning Center
Empire State College, State University
of New York
8 Prince Street
Rochester, New York 14607

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To demonstrate excellence in teaching humanities is a profound challenge to institutions like Empire State College which emphasize individualized instruction and largely self-study programs for a predominantely older-then-average aged but also very diverse student population. Because I accept this challenge for myself as a professional and for the College, I intend that this paper indicate one mentor's approach in one of the humanistic disciplines, history*. This approach, I trust, will have applicability in other disciplines too, the rest of the humanities, to be sure, but also the natural and social sciences. At the same time these reflections may serve as a stimulus to others, students and professors alike, who engage in similar or related programs of study and believe it fruitful to analyze the process in which they are engaged.

The essay is divided into two parts. One argues that the individualized instruction/self-study environment of Empire State College calls for mentors who mediate in special ways between students and the world of scholarship. The second contends that the mentor as mediator can effectively and professionally serve the needs of students by emphasizing procedural elements of doing humanities,**illustrated here by skills and concepts relevant to historical inquiry. They are also relevant to any college education in which there is deep concern for developing broad understandings of humanity.

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*The author is a Mentor in the Genesee Valley Regional Learning Center, Rochester, N.Y., of Empire State College, State University of New York. In December 1974 the College was unconditionally accredited by the Middle State Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. A nonresidential institution without a campus and located throughout the State, the College currently grants Associate and Bachelor degrees. Mentors are academicians and counselors who take responsibility for helping students through direct instruction, program planning, location and development of instructional resources, and assessment and evaluation of formal and non-formal learning.

**In using this phrase in the title and throughout the text of this paper, I acknowledge insight gained from J. H. Hexter, Doing History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971).

Mentors As Mediators

I begin with a few notions about mentors and students, attempting to describe the situation in which we operate.* Many constraints and demands impinge upon the mentor's time and efforts, particularly the work load and the dual academic and vocational counselling duties. Full-time mentors, therefore, have a principal responsibility not to primary research, publication, and the advancement of knowledge in their fields, but to presenting themselves to their students as individuals who understand their disciplines and scholarly work in those disciplines through prior study, research and writing and by means of continual review of the scholarly literature in their areas. They should attempt to stay sufficiently abreast of their fields so that they may help their students meaningfully to cope with conceptual problems and methodologies, as well as with the vast outpouring of written work of a great diversity of content and quality. They should also be aware of the fact that much of what is written by top-notch scholars in their fields is, often for a decade or more after it is originally published, either too pointed toward intradisciplinary argumentation or written according to criteria of excellence that frequently obscure, for barely initiated students, the meaning of the work. These points are particularly important when we consider our students.

In so far as I have come to know them, Empire State College

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*My colleague, George Drury, has commented at length on this paper, particularly emphasizing student-mentor relationships. These comments have helped me considerably in re-thinking some parts of it.

students are indeed curious about the past and historical explanation; in fact, I am sure that this healthy curiosity extends to other humanities and disciplines. Our students profit greatly from exposure to historical perspectives, for these perspectives lend meaning to their perceptions of their own pasts, the variety of the human condition, and to the complex and perplexing origins of the present. But they are put off, more often than liberal or progressive scholars would like to admit, by the readily apparent though paradoxical elitism that often is manifested by those who contribute to historical knowledge. This elitism, as I have chosen to call it, stems in part from the fact that monographs and journal articles that represent continuing and sometimes very exciting contributions to historical understanding are in many cases written to meet professional criteria and judgment for purposes of demonstration or personal advancement rather than for the general undergraduate reader. In fact, I have noticed that not only the literary style but also the life style of professors at prestigious institutions constitute intellectual as well as psychological barriers to receptivity to their works by many of our students. And I wish to point out that, in my opinion, this situation does not arise from a know-nothingness or anti-intellectualism on the part of students. On the contrary. Those students to whom I refer are sufficiently class conscious to conclude that many scholars do not write for them at all, that scholarship is for the Ivory Tower, that liberal pretensions to democratic sentiments are hypocritical in terms of knowledge and access to knowledge, and that facile generalizations and mountains of information represent the extent of scholarly commitment to the non-initiated.

We should not get so bound up in this antagonism, however, that we pass over something that is, for us, even more important. This is that our students expect to be treated as adults and are, for the greater part, highly motivated to learn. Adulthood has important implications for mentors in history and for the students. For it means that the students do not wish to be treated as juveniles being fed pap or some obviously pre-digested form of history or other scholarship as is all too often done. Moreover, the individualized instruction/self-study mode of Empire State College necessitates, if we are to accept our students as adults, going beyond pap in the form of a simplistic text book and the occasional volumes of "readings". We know that it is important to do differently than many introductory or intermediate history courses whose so-called behavioral objectives are demonstrations of comprehension through "correct" replies to multiple-choice "fact"-type questions and hastily written and subjectively graded "essay" exams.

The problem, however, is complex and difficult. For while our students must be treated as adults and with the respect that assumes their capability of contending with complex historical narrative, interpretation and explanation, many of them have never done much reading. In addition, a significant number of them have a relatively readily preceptible attitude of inferiority with regard to scholars, the discipline's standards of scholarship, and the notion that they may be conversant meaningfully with that area of history they choose to examine.

The solution, I believe, lies in conceiving of the mentor as a mediator between the lofty towers of research sholarship and the minds of eager, yet often class-and time-bound students. To mediate properly within the role of "a wise and trusted counselor [and] teacher"

(my dictionary's definition), the mentor in history must think carefully about the various parts of his function and of their implications for students; then he must plan and act accordingly.

Mentors should, it seems to me, deal in essences and concepts from the beginning. And the context of this beginning, for studies that incorporate observations and judgments about human existence, thought and institutions, should not be oversimplification or abstraction but introduction to the complexity within which fallible beings live and within which some of them write and study history. Moreover, mentors should never ignore the moral relationships involved in doing history--either for themselves or their students, for this helps to bring forward clearly and poignantly the need for humility with which all should enter upon the task. I cannot underscore this last point strongly enough. Students have a right to know what most already believe but which is often assumed away in teaching--that authors have points of view and biases, that they write often with implicit assumptions that may be unfortunate, and that exploring the past may be more provocative of anxiety than students are at first willing to accept.

These points are basic. But they are crucial, for they set the tone of a hopefully supportive learning environment. And on their foundation mentors and students can proceed directly to the business at hand, which is to get to the guts of some aspect of history within the Empire State College individualized instruction/self-study mode. Whatever that aspect of history may be, there are what some may call procedural elements that must be understood in common by students and mentors in order for the study to go forward. While mentors may assume the competency of students to cope with the subject, they should not take for

granted that these elements are commonly understood between them until they have been articulated, made explicit, and become the matrix for building comprehension and understanding, and for developing skills in analysis, evaluation and the synthesis of diverse ideas and materials.

It is, then, to these procedural elements of historical studies in the individualized instruction/self-study environment that I will proceed. However I trust that I have left an image of the mentor-as-mediator between socio-economic classes and between eager minds of students and sharply honed intellects of scholars. As I write this last sentence, I begin to see also that the mentor is, in our setting, perhaps most of all a mediator between different world views, states of mind and cultures, those of other times and places, and those in different professional and pedagogical relationships to the specific object of the interest of student and mentor. But this notion may require more explanation on my part than I have strength to attempt now, and so will remain unrefined for this time, unobliterated only because I sensed an idea that might benefit from the illumination of peers.

Procedural Elements

There are a host of procedural elements that are good, useful and even necessary to doing humanities in our kind of college. Until I have some better responses to this essay than my own second thoughts, and until I have a great deal more experience than I have at this time, I prefer to think of the following as something of an imperfectly differentiated and imprecisely ranked catalog.

Yet for some mentors a method may be implied in this presentation. That method may be in perceiving this catalog as a sequence for selective point-by-point examination three times, first by mentor and student as

part of the introduction to their study, the second time by both as they examine primary documents and secondary interpretations of others concerning some perceived historical reality, and the third time by the student engaged in a research and writing project of whatever magnitude and dealing directly and personally with the task of historical discovery, understanding and analysis. At least three times, then, may the student in an individualized instruction/self-study mode cope with reading, definition, significance and signification, argument, explanation, description, chronology, generalization, analysis and criticism--coming hopefully to feel himself a part of the process and undergoing a similar kind of self-inquiry to that which had been applied to the record of the past and to the masters of historical scholarship.

1. Reading. Students should be encouraged to read and to read widely, aided in part by the mentor's selection of materials and guidance in understanding them. The mentor must not make this too easy by continuous translations, but he may do some translation for purposes of illustration. At the same time, mentors must point out the importance of intellectual and argumentative contexts as well as the significance of language. Perhaps no less than those of comparative literature and philosophy, students of history must learn to confront ideas as they appear in print in terms of their original language, whether that be German or eighteenth century English. Reading is a basic tool of educated people and must be an integral part of our program. Literacy and critical awareness of self and others, however, require even more elements, as I have chosen to call them, and they are the subject of succeeding paragraphs.

Nevertheless, I contend that introducing students to reading and asking them to read is a generous beginning. Personally, I have seen

wonder, excitement and serious critical thought elicited from students' contacts with Benjamin Franklin and Woodrow Wilson as both observers and symbols of the ages in which they lived, William Appleman Williams' provocative and iconoclastic interpretations of America's past, the beautiful prose and elaborate arguments of David M. Potter, and the careful, conservative scholarship of Samuel Eliot Morison. No pre-digested synthesized and packaged learning exercise can offer so much, consonant with Empire State College objectives, as can truly individualized self-study programs which start from the paradigms of history as the skillful perception and recreation of the past and of the mentor as a guide to scholarship.

2. Definition. Words have definitions for which dictionaries are useful sources. Ideas, concepts and categories of analysis also have definitions, although college teachers often confuse their students by neglecting to define them. While this is a sin sometimes remedied by masses of material or rote memorization which substitute for the transmission of knowledge in other learning environments and which are supposed to lead students intuitively to useful definitions, such a situation cannot be tolerated in the individualized instruction/self-study environment. Indeed, one of the parameters of freedom in our learning environment is the fact that lack of direction and help, when needed, with such problems as definitions may cruelly frustrate and circumscribe learning that must go on perhaps for weeks before substantial student-mentor contact on their subject occurs. This circumstance necessitates that considerable thought be given to substantive discussion within the initial contract negotiation and writing as well as to the organization of readings and other learning exercises.

Mentors, therefore, must take elaborate pains with and for their students, for definitions often mean the difference between understanding a complex set of arguments on one hand and bafflement on the other. As we should know, what seem to be conflicting or contradictory arguments or propositions in historical scholarship in fact often represent different levels of generalization and explanation or different views of alternative categories of analysis. Unless apparently contrasting works on the same general subject are utterly incompatible, it is useful, perhaps necessary to explain the ways in which each attempts to describe and explain a particular aspect of reality and how it compares with another view. Thus, even without bringing into this discussion the problem of scholars' biases and points of view, we can help clarify our reading and that of our students by attacking the question of definition.

3. Significance and Signification. "Significance" and "signification" have places in all study, if only for the fact that scholars often dispute the "significance" of things. How often have we heard one comment on another's work: "Interesting and well researched, but lacking in "significance"? It is the intent of this section of the paper and the next one to challenge usage of this variously hallowed notion of "significance" on the basis that it is ambiguously and therefore poorly if not improperly employed.

Before we move to substance, however, it would also be clarifying to indicate that not all those who do humanities are involved explicitly with wrangles about "significance" and "signification", even if what all of them do occupies them in the realm of these concepts. For example, it may be the case that among those who do humanities in a setting like that of Empire State College, there are at least two recognizable camps, one

defined by the desire or need to think consciously about and to objectify orders and dimensions of "significances" and the other defined by an attitude that what is done or studied is "significant" in itself and requires little further explicit examination. Or the difference may better be described in terms of how and with what intent two groups of those who do humanities regard the objects of their perception and recreate some kind of image of them: one group is intensely concerned that its works be done in language and other symbols that evoke few ambiguous interpretations about reality in the mind's eye of the reader-viewer-listener; the other group sees "significance" to be intrinsic to the work it creates and often says, "This is an image of (a part of) the 'significant' world as I perceive it; do with it as you will." Historians usually belong to the first camp; creative writers and artists often constitute a core of the second. This is not to set the two groups at odds, for they need not be, nor is it written to change the behavior of the members of the second group. It is, however, to suggest that some of those who study humanities have a commitment to defining "significance" as an aspect of their methodology. And that definition, I contend, is useful for mentors and students in our individualized instruction/self-study mode.

I have begun only recently to realize just how great is the need for definition and clarification of "significance" and "signification" as elements in doing humanities. I will deal with three of their commonplace but also ambiguous meanings. When scholars argue over "significance" they often mean that they are arguing over "importance" and "value priority". In line with that first understanding, the next several paragraphs of this section will discuss "significance" as a covering phrase for the "ranking

or ordering of importances." Second, "significance" has the sense of being a sign of" or "being a sign for," and "signification" has the senses of "the state of being ascribed signs or symbols," "the act of being a sign or symbol," and "the process of ascribing signs or symbols." Thus, all things written, all sculpture and so on are "significant" by their very existence; and signs and symbols representing objects, people, ideas, and events are "significations." These senses of "significance" and "signification" should be obvious from analysis of the words. They will be discussed in terms of doing humanities in the second part of this section. A third connotation of "significance" is "consequential" or "having causal implications" and will be discussed in a succeeding section of this paper under the head of "argument."

As has been suggested, "significance" commonly is taken to treat the priority of particular arguments with regard to their importance or cogency. Here we are bound up in assumptions, explanations, and relationships, all of which are central problems in doing history and will be treated elsewhere. This first function of "significance" also is relevant to what we have already said about definition. For example, one argument may make a case for an historical tendency that can be illuminated by evidence of how closely compatible and mutually supporting the ideas, interests, and motivations of prime actors and groups seem to be to each other in promoting foreign policies of the United States such as those that lead to disastrous involvement in Southeast Asia or to dangerous and hypocritical meddling in Chile. (The argument may be that Americans have always looked abroad for foreign markets and raw materials, are driven by a need to expand the world's opportunities for liberal capitalist development, believe it their political and moral responsibility to oppose statism and communism in so-called underdeveloped

countries, and very often use foreign "adventures" to detract from, or to the neglect, of domestic political, social and economic problems.) A second argument may be based on the ways in which certain supposedly crucial decisions were made or events occurred, leading to the conclusion that particular bureaucratic procedures and institutional relationships resulted in the U.S. policy positions in Southeast Asia or Chile. (The focus may be on the Tonkin Gulf incident and Senate resolution or on the U.S. role in multilateral lending agencies such as the World Bank which relate to the deepening of involvements in Vietnam and to the difficulties and ultimate downfall of President Salvador Allende.)Both arguments are "significant," in the sense that they are "important," though they explain different things and proceed from different assumptions. The first informs us of a tendency which, according to its authors, leads in many situations to some sort of foreign relations involvement with unfortunate implications for this country and others; the second speaks at a lower level or analysis which either may assume the thrust of the first or may assume the first argument to be trivial, pernicious or wrong.

Therefore, from the point of view of particular scholars and their perceptions and interpretations of the past, the two types of argument may be either contradictory or compatible at a number of levels. The mentor may suggest that a student make his own judgment about the relationship between interpretations and their descriptions of reality. But the mentor must issue warning that the process by which judgment is reached should include analysis of the arguments themselves (discussed below) and conclusions concerning the relative importance or "significance" of each.

"Sign" is related etymologically and morphologically to "significance" and "signification". By focusing on signs, as well as symbols and images,

it is possible to illustrate the second nature of "significance" which is so often neglected in doing history and other humanities. Doing history, for one, is a business of making sense of reality through the perception of that reality directly or, more often, through signs, symbols and images that are employed to represent the reality of the past. If scholars seek more than justification or rationalization for peculiar points of view or for ideology, which indeed they do, then they probably seek knowledge. Knowledge is accurate perception of reality, as is suggested in a proviso about knowledge in the final section of this paper. Therefore, doing history must be a business of attempting to perceive the past as accurately as possible.*

As is commonly argued, history is an imaginative recreation of the past. Here again we come to signs, symbols, and images. If the historian can so imaginatively recreate the flavor and other information of an object, person, event, or idea in words (symbols) then the reader may come close to understanding that object, person, event, or idea. But the reader may understand that object, person, event, or idea only to the extent that he understands the historian's symbols (words) in the same way that the historian did, and to the extent that the historian himself understood the object, person, event, or idea and set down symbols that contained accurate information about them as they existed in their environments.

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*Professor LeGrace Benson and Wilson Wheatcroft each made important suggestions about developing the thoughts in this and the following paragraphs. I am especially indebted to Professor Benson for the concept of "affordance," which I found too difficult to use here and which requires explication in a separate article, since it is a concept which can contribute immensely to the humanities and other disciplines. I have attempted to make my discussion of the second sense of "significance" compatible with the current state of understanding about "affordance," and am solely responsible for all the shortcomings it may have. See James J. Gibson, Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966). Professor Benson's manuscript which treats "affordance" in the context of art is in an advanced state of preparation and nearing publication.

This is precisely the point. And it is here where the difficulty arises. Historians seldom perceive the past directly. They perceive it by means of signs, symbols, and images (documents, etchings, and so on) as well as by observation of elements which remain fairly constant in the environment (mountains, a snowy winter, and so on) in which the object, person, event, or idea had originally been nested. Historians therefore are dealing commonly with the past only to the degree that they perceive the past as mediated by symbols, signs, and images.* In fact, for now, we can call historians' primary documents--James Madison's first-hand account of the Constitutional Convention, for example--mediations on a first level, although some documents--a journalist's second-hand account of the Constitutional Convention as printed in a 1789 Charleston newspaper--are secondary mediations by the time historians come to them. After perceiving their documents or various types of mediations about the past, historians then set down on paper new signs, symbols, and images in order to provide readers with the opportunity to perceive them and to receive information from them about the past. This is a secondary or even tertiary level of mediation between reality, symbols representing reality, and the perceiver. Historians' articles and books, therefore, can be considered mediations of a secondary or tertiary order.

The difficulties of writing and studying history should be obvious. What is important in terms of doing history or other humanities is that historians undertake the responsibility of finding mediations that

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* For a good example, from contemporary society, of the problems of employing and interpreting symbols and sign as representations of reality, see Sheldon S. Wolin, "Looking for Reality," review of The Real America by Ben J. Wattenberg, The New York Review of Books, February 6, 1975, pp. 15-20.

faithfully represent objects, people, events, and ideas in the environments in which they originally appeared or occurred. These objects, people, events, and ideas and their environments are the historical realities about which historians seek knowledge. In finding mediations that faithfully represent reality, historians themselves must be concerned with understanding mediations as more or less faithful representations of objects, people, events, and ideas in their original environments. Indeed this is what historians think they are doing and most generally do fairly well.

It is even more important, however, for historians to understand and to analyze the information in the mediations (documents) in such a way as to know what information in these documents is in fact analogic with reality. This is one of the most difficult things of all in doing history. Why do we come this circuitous route to say this apparently obvious point? The reason is that to know about past reality we must make our perception of that past reality as much as possible like our (hopefully accurate) perceptions of objects, people, events and ideas personally perceived in the present, where accurate perception involves receiving information from those things nested in their environments now. Thus, we can picture a stormy speech by an emotive orator. Yet how much more "significant" to perceive information about the orator's delivery before an enfrenzied mob considering wreaking its vengeance upon symbols of the French monarchy! And then, how important for the historian perceiving these bits of information to be able to convey such information by his "signification."

It may seem banal yet it is important to state at this point that the historian's work involves ideas, events, people, objects, their

environments and his own self* as symbolizer in the act of creating new symbols, signs, and images for his readers. This is where the really crucial nature of "significance" and "signification" becomes so obvious.

There is yet another step to go. In the individualized instruction/self-study college environment--indeed in almost all learning environments--students begin their study of history and other humanities with books. They are then in the position of attempting to derive information about some away reality--object, person, event, or idea nested in an environment--from symbols that are some kind of representation of other symbols.

As a consequence, the mentor has a crucially important role as mediator between mediations and students. Mentors can mediate to the extent that they are skilled in the tasks of being historians, as in this case, or practitioners of other disciplines. But, in the individualized instruction/self-study mode, perhaps more can happen to help students wrest the fullest possible information about past reality from mediated mediations. Mentors can draw upon all their own learning, empathetic skills, and capabilities in interpersonal communication as they cope with the symbols, signs, and images about the past in helping students to shape their perceptions. Furthermore, mentors may draw on other observations made in this paper. One of the more important of these is that through their understanding of their students as individuals, mentors may find what I call (in the final section of the paper) "points of personal reference" that serve as a basis to link students' experiences and thoughts meaningfully

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* This is a new and contested point in history. Note, e.g.,the panel discussion "A New Form of History?: The Involved Self," on Martin Duberman's Black Mountain, Organization of American Historian's Annual Meeting, Denver, April 18, 1974.

to information from mediated sources. These mentor-as-mediator skills can help sharpen the focus of students' perceptions of the information in mediated sources in order to enhance the students' comprehension of distant reality.

The third function of "significance" in doing history is in the matter of selecting and using evidence in the construction of arguments. This aspect of significance, implying "consequence" or "having causal implications", may better be considered as a subcategory of the problem of argumentation.

4. Argument. I recall some bits of a valuable course in the basics of logic that I thought myself through twenty years ago, and I remember with more clarity the role of logic and semantics in a pair of provocative philosophy courses about twelve years later. I was greatly impressed during the second trip about the value of logic to considering all things. Almost nothing has served so well since that time as what I learned about argumentation, particularly the form of arguments in terms of their soundness, their validity, the question of ambiguity, and the problem of "causation," which I place in quotes to indicate the tentative nature of causation in historical explanation.

I wish to go a bit further in suggesting the value of understanding argument in doing history. Logic, as has been pointed out, cannot be underestimated. It is very important first in presenting arguments and second in demonstrating that the arguments indeed explain something. Whether stated formally or simply inferred by the context, arguments must be sound, meaning that without considering the truthfulness of the premises, the organization of the premises and conclusions as well as their relationship to each other must be such that the argument has no logical defects.

Logicians have special, often Latin names for these defects; the rules for avoiding them should, I believe, be part of the equipment of a decent college education. Beyond soundness, arguments must also be valid, which is to say that true premises in a sound argument lead to a true conclusion. It should be evident that arguments may be both sound and false at the same time.

Of course, since history is bound up in the task of explanation, arguments should have a demonstrable relationship to what reasonable and knowledgeable people would term explanatory meaning. (Please recall the foregoing discussion of "significance" in its 'consequential' sense.) This position is continually tempered, however, by the understanding that more often than not evidence is insufficient to conclude decisively in the complex human context that is the stuff of history. In any event, arguments may illuminate meaningful comparisons, relationships and analogies, which then become powerful tools for translating the evidence of the past and arguments about it into "causal" explanations and into what we term, with somewhat greater precision, generalizations. But caution is in order here too, lest comparisons, relationships and analogies become too trite or far-fetched to make sense.

The vital building block of arguments in history, as elsewhere, is evidence. Here we confront the profound complexity of attempting explanations about the past which must be clarified at an early point in individualized instruction/self-study programs of learning. This is not the place to do more than to raise a few pertinent questions: If history is based largely on the written record of the past, how do scholars evaluate fragmentary notes of complex civilizations, activities and thought? When larger amounts of documentation are available, how does a scholar select

among them? How does the scholar interpolate between documents on the one hand and motivation and thought on the other? How do scholars, in short, rat[illegible]e significance of data and evidence? And to what extent is their perception of the past limited by the written record itself and by the scholars' assumptions and definitions about their evidence, their categories of analysis and what they seek to explain? As I have suggested already in this essay, our college students must not be thought incapable of understanding the explicit or implicit stratagems which are inherent in the scholarship and disciplines they study.

Furthermore, students must realize that arguments, major and minor alike, are building blocks of historical explanation. Conversely, the power of explanation depends on the soundness and validity of the component arguments, the judgments employed in selecting and interpreting evidence, and the wisdom of illustrative comparisons, relationships and analogies. This brings us to explanation as a distinct category of this essay.

5. Explanation. In Historians' Fallacies; Toward a Logic of Historical Thought (1970), David Hackett Fischer writes of the historian in a sense that seems applicable to other scholars concerned with human existence. The historian, he states, is "someone (anyone) who asks an open-ended question about past events and answers it with selected facts which are arranged in the form of an explanatory paragidm." (p. xv) Fischer's definition has important implications for the problem of argumentation, and it also raises directly the question of explanation. Without misleading the reader to believe that these very cursory paragraphs more than touch the surface, I still think it useful to explore an aspect of explanation, and not the only one, that should be raised in student-mentor discussions on history as well as other humanities and social sciences.

It is common to think of "cause" as the basic kind of explanation. This may be the case in everyday life where demonstrable responsibility or relationships are functionally necessary. For example firefighters attempt to identify causes of conflagrations for several reasons: to be able to differentiate between petroleum and wood fires in order to combat each effectively, to determine whether arson or electrical failure be associated with ignition in order to take future preventative measures, and so on.

Historical explanation is usually more complex. The major notions that I wish to set forth here are that we be aware of the tentative nature of explanation of complex phenomena and that we comprehend the logical nature of "cause". About the first notion, I believe, little more needs to be said at this point except to note that liberality in judgments about the past, even where much evidence is available, may teach us similar liberality about current judgments on human affairs where proximity and emotion, among others, often cloud the perceptor's eye and mind.

The second notion deserves somewhat better treatment. It involves understanding the differences between necessary and sufficient conditions in their relationships to outcomes. A necessary condition is one without which the outcome in question would not occur, but with which it is not necessarily the case that the outcome would happen. A sufficient condition, on the other hand, is all that must be true so that the conclusion will follow. Students of history often mistake the two, as also, I fear, do scholars. Let us cite examples. Adolf Hitler may have been a necessary condition for the growth and development, as it in fact occurred, of Germany's Third Reich; but he was certainly not a sufficient condition for

what transpired in German domestic and international politics between 1933 and 1945. Alternatively, given the effective foreign military alliances of Great Britain and France at the time, Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 constituted a sufficient condition for a state of war to exist between western powers and the Third Reich. Historical explanation is clearly much more complicated than the slender presentation here would indicate; description of the proximate cause of war between Great Britain and Germany in 1939 cannot explain anything more than that.

These complications should serve as a warning to caution. That caution must be extended to three additional categories of interest to those doing history and other disciplines; these categories are description, chronology and generalization, on which I wish merely to comment briefly.

6. Description and chronology. Description and chronology are different concepts, yet they are both integral components of history and nearly all other disciplines. They are vital in everyday life, whether in journalism, criminal investigation, or architecture. Their consideration in the early stages of doing humanities in the individualized instruction/self-study environment could improve the quality of the resultant learning. First, description and chronology are not, by themselves, ever much more than superficial explanation, although they do help organize evidence for arguments and are a purpose of doing history. Indeed, description and chronology may explain nothing at all in the sense that explaining implies giving reasons or causes for something. Second, both description and chronology are subject to the weaknesses of ordinary argumentation and explanation which are noted above.

A simple example from personal experiences will illustrate the point: In an environment of racial tensions within a transitional neighborhood in Washington, D.C., a southern law officer and I observed an argument between black workmen and the owner of a vacant building next door to our rooming house. Past midnight we were awakened to the noise of firefighters dousing a minor blaze, apparently purposefully set, in that building. And my companion promptly concluded, "I'll bet it was those blacks," promptly informing a policeman on duty in the street. Later that day, in analysis of this tale with a friend, I was informed that a high percentage of fires in vacant buildings of edifices under construction in the city had been determined to be started by itinerant or homeless tramps. Clearly the southern policeman's conclusion, based in part on context, description and chronology was insufficient; although it may have been a good guess it appeared to me more likely to be supported by a number of additional assumptions and predispositions in his mind.

7. Generalization. A significant goal of much non-fiction writing is generalization based on the material examined and sometimes relating it to concepts and situations beyond those surveyed in the work. But generalizations are often traps of which we should beware. In order to be seen as meaningful, generalizations must be evaluated in terms of their reasonable truthfulness and correspondence to the arguments, evidence, explanations and chronologies from which they are derived. They must also be judged in their relationship to some relevant context. Thus historians often err in generalizing about American ideology or political practice on the basis of an examination of a few carefully selected individuals or events. I often point out to students not only

that such generalizations, without additional evidence and better relation to context, are weak, but also that they reveal more about the scholars and the individual cases examined than about the nature of larger, complex things. This leads to insights about how different hypotheses concerning American ideology or political practice gain currency. It also illustrates how sound perceptions about small pieces of reality are generalized in what may be misleading ways about larger hunks of reality, and how apparently incompatible propositions in fact can coexist quite nicely if toned down considerably.

8. Analysis and criticism. Outlining with students those parts of historical and other scholarship which have been catalogued above may provide a good foundation upon which to engage in analysis. To the degree that they have been learned with humility and understanding, these tools enable one initiated into the appropriate historiographical context to take works of history apart and to examine the parts separately. Just as important in my opinion, they may provide our students with sufficient basis in self-confidence on which to venture into the realm of criticism. For, if considered with a proper respect for their profundity, they help bridge the gap between our world of individualized instruction/self-study and the high culture of scholarship. This catalog, then, is a kind of organized guide to thinking about and doing some kinds of scholarship. It seems to be that the presentation of such guides, implicitly or explicitly, is a prime responsibility of mentors who believe that such procedural elements enable them to mediate more effectively between desire and learning.

Analysis and criticism, of course, extend to the assumptions of scholars as well as to what Fischer calls "open-ended questions about

past events." Such analysis and criticism may turn out even better if built on personal experience of the student in doing what historians or other scholars do: definition of purpose, research and writing that reify scholarship and the mechanical and intellectual processes involved. In my opinion, this reification also means developing some sense of the empathetic skills that good historians have. Thus we must turn next to research and writing and finally to the moral questions inherent in teaching and thinking about history.

9. Research and writing. There are a goodly number of useful, interesting guides to the mechanics of research and writing. I wish to say nothing more about these mechanics than to add that mentors should consider it a part of their responsibility to give active guidance in these areas. What I wish to stress, however, is the notion that research and writing are among the best means available for the clarification of thinking processes. History is no more important here than any other discipline, even though I believe it true that history does have the virtue of bringing students into contact with as broad a variety of human experience as any other. The point is that in our individualized instruction/self-study mode, where many adult students dip into the humanities in order to satisfy state-mandated degree requirements, such study can have tremendous value. It surely exposes students to those human experiences that are beyond one's workday world. Furthermore, rigorous pursuit of the objectives of research and writing, again with the mediation of the mentor, necessitates even more active participation of students' intellectual faculties than the also essential student-mentor discussion about books or ideas in which these faculties may be allowed to be relatively passive.

Although this may also express a personal bias, I would like to see the essay form in all its variety revitalized as part of learning in the humanities. I would like to see the essay emphasized over "reports" and "term papers," for I believe that these latter terms are incomplete paradigms for what writing in the humanities should be like. (I take the essay to be, as one of my dictionaries has it, "a literary composition, analytical or interpretative, dealing with its subject from a more or less limited or personal standpoint" and created with awareness of this concept.)

When well done over its various attempts and drafts, the essay will show students what they can do in both form and content, which is often more than they believe they are capable of doing. Both form and content of an essay give shape to and gratify a creative impulse that is an essence of the humanities and to which all students may profitably be exposed. It is certainly not the case that I offer the essay as a prescription, especially because I too realize the pain it causes when insensitively administered. I simply argue for research and writing, organized in a recognizable shape such as that of an essay, as very often useful companions at nearly every stage of undergraduate learning programs, and as an even more invaluable tool within the individualized instruction/self-study learning environment. Another and perhaps more precise way to make my point is to assert that good student-mentor interactions do indeed call forth "active" participation of students' intellectual faculties in learning. But this participation is, in my view, of a different qualitative nature when the student in research and writing interacts with library resources, note cards, and, more importantly, the thoughts that take shape on paper in the loneliness of individual creation.

10. Moral sensitivity. Moral sensitivity is not properly a pro-

cedural element in college learning, nor is it a particular tool for learning in individualized instruction/self-study modes. Yet for some time I have thought of a number of questions that I believe relevant to all instruction and perhaps especially important to our College. These questions are aspects of a category I term moral sensitivity, which I consider a crucial component of the learning environment. I categorize these questions under the labels of values, cultures, responsibility, the limits of knowledge, normative thought, and points of personal reference.

No study or scholar, particularly those in the social sciences and humanities, is value free. Let us be clear about that. But let us also acknowledge that it is important to move beyond that quite trivial assertion. We should get to the point where we are as explicit as possible about the values that motivate, circumscribe or color scholarship and study. Historiography has often had the implicit value that nationality and patriotism are good and just, and that may be the case. However, such historiography has sometimes neglected skeletons in America's past because of that value which was woven into the original research and writing. This may have had the effect of both misperceiving our heritage and of supporting those who denounce critics as being unpatriotic. We must alert students to such possibilities as this, for some may be sufficiently awed by the volume they pick up that they also accept for themselves its unjustified value contents. Similarly, if one chooses a treatise dealing with civil liberties that was written a generation ago, one is likely to observe a neglect of rights of ethnic minorities or women; this tells something about the perceptions of rights of the 1950's that is as important as the substantive contents of the book.

Study of history exposes one to cultural differences. Those engaged in such study should be clear about these differences and the ways in which they can be interpreted. Care should be taken to point out inferences of superiority and inferiority in written work as well as implications about the goodness or badness of cultures and cultural characteristics. Distinctions should be drawn between appropriate generalizations about groups of people and observations about individuals. It is one of my personal views that recognition of cultural diversity and of the potential of cultural groups to satisfy human needs for community and security would contribute to a more healthy world. Such a view is not unusual today. It also reflects my concern for the implications of inter-cultural relations, both within countries and between them. Therefore, I have no personal qualms about stating my attitude and about examining cultural questions with my students as part of doing a humanistic study.

For discussion of values and cultural differences with students I accept the responsibility willingly. I may not forsee all the effects of my mentoring, but I still will not disclaim responsibility, insofar as it can be reasonably attributed. What I caution against is a failure to understand responsibility of this kind in college teaching. My gripe is illustrated by the attitude of disdain and distance manifested by professors who provided students with a substantive and critical basis for challenging the United States position in Vietnam and then called into question the students' rational and analysis. Such a position was a failure to come to grips with the two important facts: that those professors had themselves in their teaching made available precisely the material used by the students, and that those professors were teaching under progressive assumptions about learning and the rationality of students whom they now thought to be crazy. This is not to contend that professors must accept all subsequent behavior of their

students as their responsibility, but that they should have been more concerned about their own assumptions and motivations in doing what they were doing in teaching about American foreign policy.

This should lead us to a recognition of the limits of knowledge. Surely we should be clear about what knowledge is. It certainly is not information about anything. Knowledge is accurate perception about reality. Having already seen how easily we misperceive reality, we should reach the conclusion that when we talk of knowledge in any teaching situation it should be with a self-awareness of humility about what knowledge is and what it means. I see no reason why our students should not be let into that little secret also, for otherwise we will have borne the responsibility for additional arrogance in a world that has seen enough of it. Beyond this, let us recall what Francis Bacon said about knowledge: that it is a basis of "utility and power." The thought applies equally well to belief and misperception, which have been inestimable forces in all human affairs.

From what has already been said, it is appropriate to introduce another notion on which it may be useful to reflect. The notion is that history can be normative. Let me review the concept. Social and policy "sciences" are often normative in the sense that they argue for, predict, or attempt to construct futures for human behavior according to articulated standards. History, as a humanity, is a way of studying the past and of gaining insight into the variety and profundity of human experience. Yet to the degree that it reflects the views of writers and their times, it is at least implicitly normative, for it attempts to instruct the reader in the context of norms for perceiving that reality which was established by the writer of the times. This is to say that we should not be blind to the "programs" for future thinking about the past that are at least implicit in writing about that past.

So finally we come to an end, which is also a beginning. There are always points of personal reference in the lives of people from which the mentor/mediator and students may enter into the study of humanities. This essay may be a point of personal reference for certain intellectual commitments and learning experiences by all. However, it has been a part of this essay's thesis that mentors in our type of learning environment have a special responsibility for understanding and mediating between the personal and intellectual points of reference of our students on the one hand, and both the frameworks from which scholars proceed and the "cultures" of different times and places that are the object of study on the other.

There is another side too. When one comes to the conclusion of a program of individualized instruction/self-study in the humanities, what remains and is carried on for continued understanding and action? My own hope is for capable, sensitive people, more fully comprehended and comprehending than before--and willing to carry on in active lives of value to themselves and others. My hope is that each of the points of this paper may become personal references to such meaning, which goes far beyond the more narrowly defined study itself. This paper, then, is dedicated to that purpose.

RNS:dw